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embarrass, *v.*

Pronunciation: Brit. /ɪmˈbærəs/, /ɛmˈbærəs/,

U.S. /əmˈberəs/, /ɛmˈberəs/

Forms:

α. 15 **imbaratsed** (past participle), 15 **inbarres**, 16 **imbarasse**, 16 **imbarrest** (past participle), 16–17 **imbarrass**, 16–17 **imbarrast** (past participle), 17 **imbarass**; also Sc. pre-17 **imbarace**, pre-17 **inbarass**.

β. 16 **embaras**, 16 **embarressed** (past participle), 16–17 **embarass**, 16–18 **embarras**, 16– **embarrass**.

Frequency (in current use):

Origin: Apparently a borrowing from French. **Etymons:** French *embarrasser*, *embarasser*.

Etymology: Apparently < Middle French, French *embarrasser*, †*embarasser* to put (a person) in a difficult or awkward situation (a1571), to confuse, perplex (a person) (1580, originally used reflexively), to impede (a process, especially the normal use of something) (1690) < Spanish *embarazar* (c1460), probably < Portuguese *embaraçar* (15th cent.) < *em-* EM- *prefix* + *baraço* cord (1260; early 12th cent. as †*baraza*), apparently originally with reference to animals being restrained by a cord or leash; further etymology uncertain and disputed: see J. Corominas *Diccionario critico etimológico castellano e hispánico* (ed. 2, 1981) at *embarazar*.

The French verb was probably first used in the Spanish Netherlands.

With the α. forms compare IM- *prefix*¹, and also (< Spanish) Italian *imbarazzare* to hamper or impede (a person, action, or process), to block (a road or place) (a1600; compare *imbarazzato* hampered, obstructed (c1535)), to confuse, perplex (a person) (a1685).

Sense 2b is not paralleled in French; in quot. 1684, rendering French *embarrasser avec quelqu'un* (reflexive) to become involved with (a person) (1669 in the passage translated, or earlier).

1. *trans.*

a. To hamper or impede (a person, action, or process). Now *rare*.

1578 in *10th Rep. Royal Comm. Hist. MSS* (1885) App. v. 428 His bill of complaint importing his povertie and losses before [the] gennerall Courte and Counsaill for obtaining and observinge any protection or other liberties and fredomes to inbarres and staye his creditors.

1588 T. HICKOCK tr. C. Federici *Voy. & Trauaile* f. 40 Let him not be astonied, at the troubles that I haue passed: because I was imbaratsed in many things [It. *perchè mi posi a sbaraglio in molte cose*].

1616 J. MAITLAND *Apol. W. Maitland* in *Misc. Sc. Hist. Soc.* (1904) II. 204 The King of france..Imbaracit..in a great warre against the Protestants.

1668 DRYDEN *Of Dramatick Poesie* 30 Another thing in which the French differ from us and from the Spaniards, is, that they do not imbarass, or cumber themselves with too much Plot.

1692 W. TEMPLE *Mem. Christendom* i. 7 The Character of Ambassador, which would delay, or embarras me with preparations of Equipage.

- 1734 tr. C. Rollin *Anc. Hist.* I. 252 Hannibal..ran to the assistance of his troops, who were thus embarrassed.
- 1778 E. JENINGS *Considerations Mode & Terms Treaty Peace with Amer.* 15 The delay of doing what was right..daily embarrasses the progress of peace.
- 1803 MARQUESS WELLESLEY *Let.* 27 June in Duke of Wellington *Dispatches* (1837) II. 53 The state of the rivers..will embarrass the enemy in a considerable degree.
- 1856 J. A. FROUDE *Hist. Eng.* (1858) II. ix. 402 A general council would..embarrass their movements.
- 1913 A. T. MAHAN *Major Operations of Navies in War of Amer. Independence* xii. 211 A crippled ship in a chased fleet..embarrasses movement.
- 1992 *French Rev.* 65 393 Their [*sc.* conventional forces'] tentacles..embarrass and hamper her development.

b. To obstruct (a road, river, etc.). Cf. earlier EMBARRASSED *adj.* 1b.

Now rare.

- 1735 J. CAMPBELL *Mil. Hist. Eugene of Savoy* I. 194 The Elector..sent immediately Messieurs Grimaldé, Verboom and Capres..to stop the English General, by impeding his Passage from Groenendael, which they executed by cutting down a great Number of large Trees, which embarrassed the Road.
- 1757 P. TEMPLEMAN tr. F. L. Norden *Trav. Egypt & Nubia* II. 130 There is in the Nile a place very dangerous to pass, on account of the stones which embarrass the channel of the river.
- 1820 J. LUCCOCK *Notes Rio de Janeiro* xv. 491 Nodules of corroded metal had rolled down and greatly embarrassed the road.
- 1860 R. WILSON *Narr. Events during Invasion of Russia* 158 The multitude of wounded embarrassed the road.
- 1918 P. B. KYNE *Valley of Giants* ix. 80 He claims he's short of rolling-stock—that wrecks and fires have embarrassed the road. He can always find excuses.

c. To provide (a person) with an (overwhelming or encumbering) excess or abundance of riches, resources, options, etc. Usually in *pass.*

Cf. EMBARRAS DE RICHESSE *n.*, EMBARRAS DE CHOIX *n.*, *embarrassment of riches* at EMBARRASSMENT *n.* 1d, *an embarrassment of choice* at EMBARRASSMENT *n.* 1d.

- 1738 *Hist. Reg.* No. 92. 288/2 The humble Petition..Sheweth, that your Petitioners..are as little afraid of being embarrassed with Riches..as any Vagabonds in Christendom.
- 1793 tr. J.-B. Louvet de Couvray *Life & Adventures Chevalier de Faublas* II. 144 By the death of his uncle, he became embarrassed with riches.
- 1857 *Morning Post* 4 May 2/3 As the day for opening the exhibition approaches, the executive committee begin to find themselves embarrassed with riches.
- 1873 *Dublin Univ. Mag.* Apr. 461/1 As if to embarrass us with riches, comes also Mr. Muir and presents us with another life of the prophet.
- 1899 A. W. WARD *Great Brit. & Hanover* iv. 119 Walpole can hardly have been embarrassed by much wealth of choice when he made this selection.
- 1954 *Denton (Texas) Record-Chron.* 19 Apr. 4/1 It must be an agreeable change for British

housewives to be embarrassed by riches.

1993 *Cricket World* 3 Apr. 34/1 At this period the selectors were embarrassed with a battery of top class fast bowlers to pick from.

2006 A. J. GREGOR *Search Neofascism* i. 8 The study of fascism..was embarrassed by riches.

d. Of a debt, tax, etc.: to cause (a person or organization) financial difficulties. Usually in *pass*.

1777 J. CAMPBELL *Memorial for John Duke of Argyll* 11 It has been before observed, that Sir Lauchlan M'Lean had been much embarrassed by debt, before his succession to the estate.

1830 *Amer. Ann. Reg. 1827–9* 109/2 He showed that the coasting trade was embarrassed by this [tonage] duty.

1890 MRS. H. WOOD *House of Halliwell* xx. 248 Then we had bought some furniture on our marriage, and that debt embarrassed us.

1934 E. O'NEILL *Let.* 14 June in *Sel. Lett.* (1988) 437 A rumor has reached me that you and the family are temporarily embarrassed by taxes, etc. soon coming due.

1999 M. LINDEMANN *Med. & Society in Early Mod. Europe* v. 127 The hospital..in medieval Cambridge lent money to 'men of substance' embarrassed by their debts.

2. *trans.*

a. To cause (a person, the mind, etc.) to feel uncertain; to confuse, perplex. Now *rare*.

?1656 R. FLECKNOE *Relation Ten Years Trav.* xlii. 134 Never was man so Embaras'd and perplext as I; not knowing betwixt the too humble, and the too brave, what to write or say.

1672 DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM *Rehearsal* I. 6 The people being embarrast by their equal tyes to both.

1704 S. COUPER *Three Ess. conc. Church Govt.* i. 3 A certain Philosopher, who by the subtilty of his arguments against Christianity, sought to imbarass the Bishops.

1774 LD. MONBODDO *Of Origin & Progress of Lang.* (ed. 2) I. I. ix. 124 He could not conceive and argue..without imbarassing his thoughts.

1820 B. TRAVERS *Dis. Eye* III. iii. 326 The free escape of the vitreous humor..may embarrass an operator.

1854 H. H. MILMAN *Hist. Lat. Christianity* III. VI. iii. 44 Frederick..embarrassed them..with the choice among five prelates.

1906 *Mind* 15 10 The idea of instantaneousness, which is a temporal idea, must not here be introduced to embarrass our thoughts.

b. To complicate or confuse (a matter, subject, issue, etc.); to render perplexing or problematic. Now somewhat *rare*.

1684 tr. F. Hédelin d'Aubignac *Whole Art of Stage* III. i. 5 His Advice is only that the Poet do not bring a Fourth Person upon the Stage so as to embarass or confound the business in hand [Fr. *que le*

quatrième venant à parler, ne s'embarrasse mal à propos avec les autres].

- 1736 BP. J. BUTLER *Analogy of Relig.* I. iv. 75 One Irregularity after another, embarrasses things to such a Degree, that, [etc.].
- 1771 O. GOLDSMITH *Hist. Eng.* I. Pref. p.ii Our abridgements are generally more tedious than the works from which they pretend to relieve us, and they have effectually embarrassed that road which they laboured to shorten.
- 1818 W. CRUISE *Digest Laws Eng. Real Prop.* (ed. 2) VI. 25 I do not apprehend that this case will be embarrassed by that decision.
- 1876 E. MELLOR *Priesthood* iv. 154 This designation by their ordinary names..must embarras every theory which involves a substantial change.
- 1967 *Mod. Law Rev.* **30** 649 It was pleaded by counsel for Bywaters that his case was embarrassed by evidence of letters written by Mrs. Thompson to him which were used in evidence against her.
- 1991 S. GUEST *Ronald Dworkin* vi. 148 Our intuition that just wars are morally permissible embarrasses our theory that innocent life must never be taken.

3.

a. trans. To make (a person) feel awkward or self-conscious; to cause to feel embarrassment (EMBARRASSMENT *n.* 3). Also *intr.* (Now the usual sense.)

In early use sometimes difficult to distinguish from sense 2a.

- 1751 J. CLELAND *Mem. Coxcomb* 26 My steadyness of gaze began to embarrass and give her pain.
- 1796 M. WOLLSTONECRAFT *Lett. Sweden, Norway & Denmark* vi. 66 I wished to have had a room to myself; for their attention, and rather distressing observation, embarrassed me extremely.
- 1837 *Amer. Ann. Educ.* **7** 125 Nothing embarrassed me more than to be concerned in anything which required speaking or acting before a large concourse of people.
- 1896 A. E. H. BARR *Knight of Nets* vii. 149 Her child-like enthusiasms..both delighted and embarrassed her husband.
- 1929 E. BOWEN *Last September* xv. 182 His unordered moods gave him the churlishness of a schoolboy; his silliness embarrassed her.
- 1956 I. MURDOCH *Flight from Enchanter* iii. 29 He was embarrassed by his partial baldness.
- 1992 N. POSTMAN *Technopoly* x. 166 Words that you have been taught not to use., when used too often, are stripped of their power to shock, to embarrass.
- 2008 *Church Times* 9 May 28/2 I was left in the awkward spiritual dilemma whether to remain in a hunch-crouch position for the prayers or to embarrass my children and draw attention to myself by kneeling down in the aisle.

b. trans. To compel (a person, organization, government, etc.) *into* a particular course of action by (fear of) embarrassment.

- 1793 *Parl. Reg. Ireland* XIII. 500 It was not now sought., to embarrass him into compliance.
- 1885 L. G. TYLER *Let. & Times of Tylers* II. ii. 42 To embarrass the President into compliance, he subsequently moved an amendment to repeal the law of 1836 regulating the deposits in the State

banks.

- 1962 *Science* 11 May 490/1 The Soviets were assured that the U.S. was not conspiring to embarrass them into a return invitation, but the decision to stay away from the Cape has held fast.
- 1975 *Valley Independent* (Monessen, Pa.) 24 Feb. 4/1 Students..have been staying away from classes, marching in protest, carrying signs, walking out of classes, all obviously intending to embarrass the board into changing its mind.
- 1999 A. H. ION *Cross in Dark Valley* iv. 92 Missionaries realized that adverse international publicity could embarrass the Japanese authorities into giving them concessions.
- 2004 *Touch* Mar. 60/2 Two days before we meet, he bumrushed the stage of Twista's gig in New York and tried to embarrass the..execs into negotiating away his contract in public.

c. trans. To cause (an organization, government, person, etc.) to appear incompetent, inadequate, or less worthy of respect; to humiliate.

- 1839 *Mirror of Parl.* (2nd Sess., 14th Parl.) 3 2535/1 Mr. Pitt may have said to Mr. Fox that he embarrassed the Government by his opposition to the war.
- 1934 W. S. CHURCHILL *Marlborough* I. 491 As he was a banished man..his return would have embarrassed the Government by laying them open to accusations of favouring the Jacobites.
- 1968 *Times* 31 Oct. 11/3 It is now becoming..clear that an intelligent plan may have to be drawn, according to which those elements hell-bent on..embarrassing the School will have to be expelled from it.
- 1993 *MacUser* Oct. 29/3 There's no need to embarrass Apple further by mentioning that the 165c had to be replaced within weeks because of a wonky screen.
- 2012 *Sun* (Nexis) 25 Nov. 2 Then on 14 minutes, Wojciech Szczesny had to beat out a ferocious Andreas Weimann volley which threatened to embarrass him at his near post.

d. trans. (refl.) To cause oneself embarrassment; to make oneself seem foolish by behaving in an inappropriate or incompetent manner; to make a fool of oneself.

- 1854 C. A. A. HUBBACK *May & Dec.* III. ix. 140 He desired her to be seated, not to hurry or embarrass herself, but to take her time in anything she wanted to say.
- 1871 *Emigrant's Wife* II. iii. 39 He doesn't allow Mrs. Wilkins to embarrass herself by making an untruthful statement, but changes the subject.
- 1898 *Gentleman Farmer* Jan. 41 'I don't like to embarrass myself,' said Jack, 'by appearing uninvited in the salon of Countess Strovlovski.'
- 1922 C. HARRIS *Eyes of Love* iv. 84 He hesitated, as if he were about to embarrass himself by committing a breach of family confidence.
- 1986 L. ERDRICH *Beet Queen* (1989) IV. xiv. 303 She told of..janitors who waxed the halls so she would slip and embarrass herself.
- 2010 *Daily Tel.* (Nexis) 2 Oct. (Weekend Suppl.) 5 There will also be masterclasses on wine investment and..how to taste wines without embarrassing yourself.

e. intr. To feel awkward or self-conscious; to feel embarrassment.
Frequently in negative constructions and chiefly with *easily* and *easy*.

- 1936 *Piqua (Ohio) Daily Call* 11 Feb. 8/6 Congressman Wright Patman doesn't embarrass easily.
- 1977 *Hutchinson (Kansas) News* 10 Aug. 5/2 'I'm not going to embarrass too many people,' she said, smiling. 'It depends on how easily people embarrass.'
- 1994 P. ROSEMOOR *Silent Sea* xii. 242 'You don't know Father. He doesn't embarrass. At all.'
- 2007 D. D. BIRCH *From my Soul to Yours* 171 I was so damn embarrassed. And I don't embarrass easy.
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